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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this unit is to provide activities to help 7-12 grade students understand some of the physical handicaps and social problems that the elderly must face. The unit, designed to be used in six class sessions, is arranged into two parts. In the first, students vicariously experience what it is like to have some physical handicaps that are common to older people by participating in simulations in which they experience impairment of vision, hearing, and mobility. For example, students' eyes are covered and then they are asked to walk across a stage. Objectives are for students to feel empathy for elders with physical handicaps, describe specific physical problems that frequently come with advanced age, and cite ways in which good health habits can minimize the effects of aging. The second set of activities deals with relations between older and younger persons. Students read a problem situation, such as, "a retired factory worker with a heart condition must persuade a manager in an apartment building that he is capable of being a security guard in an apartment." Then students use these problem situations to prepare skits which they act out for the class and invited older guests. Objectives are to help students understand typical social problems faced by elders, cite ways in which society often places restrictions and demands on the behavior of older people, and recognize similarities in the way society often expects old and young people to behave. Skit situations and skit analysis handouts are included. Each unit activity contains an overview, a list of objectives and materials needed, information on the advance preparation and teaching time required, and guidelines for each day's activity. (Author/NE)

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WHAT'S IT LIKE TO BE OLD?

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TEACHING AND LEARNING ABOUT AGING
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INTRODUCTION

As people grow old they are likely to face both the physical and social problems that come with age. The physical problems may result from the normal aging process, or they may simply be the result of poor lifelong health habits that catch up with them in later years. The social problems often result from societal prejudice and bias that cause people to expect different behavior from the elderly.

The negative views that people often have toward aging in part result from the assumption that whatever happens to people when they grow old happens because they are old. In other words, people (especially the young) not only expect the elderly to be ill or handicapped and to behave according to popular stereotypes, but they also assume that these are "natural" patterns of aging.

One way to challenge these assumptions is for students to act out situations that simulate physical and social problems common to older people. Through the process of role playing, students gain empathy toward older people faced with these problems. Through follow-up discussion they can begin to sort out problems which are a necessary part of the aging process from those which are created by individuals and society. In the area of social problems they can begin to recognize some of the ways in which society places restrictions on both young and old, and establishes similar expectations for their behavior.

This unit is divided into two activities. The first activity gives students vicarious experience with some physical handicaps common to older people. The second activity presents students with problem situations involving relations with other people. Students use these problem situations to prepare skits which they act out for the class and invited older guests. Follow-up discussions help to sift out myth and misinformation, while the experience of interacting with older people provides an additional perspective on what it means to be old.

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ACTIVITY 1: PHYSICAL PROBLEMS OF AGING

Overview:

Through a series of simulation activities students experience some of the physical problems that frequently come with old age. These include impairment of vision, hearing and mobility. Follow-up discussion emphasizes that while physical decline does accompany aging, the types and degree of impairment vary considerably from one individual to another. Also emphasized is the fact that people who follow good health habits throughout life usually enjoy good health in old age.

Objectives:

At the conclusion of this activity, students will be able to:

1. Have greater empathy for elders with physical handicaps.
2. Describe specific physical problems that frequently come with advanced age.
3. Cite ways in which good habits of mental and physical health can minimize the effects of aging.

Materials needed:

For the students:

a. Strips of semi-opaque plastic, preferably yellow. Plastic wrap, cheesecloth or cling gauze may be substituted. (Quantity sufficient for 1/3 of class)

b. Ear plugs. Ear muffs or cotton balls may be substituted. (Quantity sufficient for 1/3 of class)

c. Finger splints or wooden tongue depressors (Quantity sufficient for 1/3 of class)

d. Masking tape

e. Needle, thread, buttons and fabric (For three students)

For the teacher:

Cassette tape recorder and tape (optional)

Advance preparation:

Prepare materials for simulating physical problems. (See guidelines for Day 1.)

Select or prepare a tape recording. (Optional--see guidelines for Day 1, Step 5.)

Estimated teaching time:

2 class periods

Guidelines, day 1:

1. Divide the class into three groups to participate in simulations of impaired vision, hearing and mobility.

2. Place strips of semi-opaque plastic over the eyes of one group of students, and tape the borders with masking tape.

3. Ask these students to perform one or more of the following exercises:

   a. Read aloud a script with which they are not familiar.

   b. Walk across the stage.

   c. Find phone numbers of other students in a telephone directory.

   d. Examine a multi-colored chart with and without the eye coverings.

4. Ask the second group of students to insert plugs in their ears.

5. Ask these students to perform one or both of the following exercises:

   a. Form pairs in which one student stands behind the other and reads sentences which the other student is expected to repeat.

   b. Play a recording at decreased volume and then have the students respond to prepared questions about what they heard.

6. Ask students in the third group whether they are left-handed or right-handed. To simulate arthritis, tape some fingers of the dominant hand into a bent position, or tape two fingers together with a splint or tongue depressor.

7. Ask these students to perform one or more of the following exercises:

   a. Perform a task such as buckling a shoe, buttoning a shirt or picking up a small object. They should try it first with the unimpaired hand, ther with the impaired hand.

   b. Write their name or a short paragraph on a subject you assign.

   c. Thread a needle and sew a button on a small piece of fabric.

8. When all students have completed the simulations, hold an open discussion of their experiences in terms of what it felt like to experience a handicap and what problems each handicap presented for daily living.

Guidelines, day 2:

9. Explain to the class that the simulations done on the previous day were meant to give students some insight into physical problems that frequently occur in old age.

10. Emphasize that, although all five senses decline with age, such problems as loss of vision, hearing and mobility can happen to people at any age and that no physical ailment necessarily happens to all people who grow old. Stress that most elderly people enjoy good health and that many people, even in their eighties or nineties, still have good eyesight, hearing and mobility.

11. Provide the following information about the physical handicaps simulated in the activities:

    a. *Vision: As people grow older the lens of the eye sometimes yellows. which makes it difficult to distinguish between colors. Cataracts may grow over the eye causing vision to become blurry. In most cases operations can be performed to remove the cataracts and clear vision can be restored with glasses, lens implants or contact lenses.*

b. *Hearing: As people grow older, hearing loss is more common than loss of vision. There are two major types of hearing loss: (1) loss of ability to hear sounds of low intensity, and (2) loss of ability to hear sounds of high frequency. Hearing aids can often help people to overcome problems of impaired hearing.*

c. *Mobility: Although loss of mobility can be caused by many things, one frequent cause is arthritis. Even young or middle-aged people may have arthritis, but it is more common among older people.*

12. Ask students to think of specific ways in which these handicaps might affect daily life.

13. Emphasize again that these handicaps are not restricted to old age and are not necessarily "typical" of people who are old. Take time to point out the following:

a. *Some people have achieved their greatest success in their sixties, seventies, eighties and nineties. (Cite examples such as Eubie Blake, George Burns, Helena Rubenstein, Pablo Picasso and Grandma Moses.)*

b. *All people age differently and each individual has "many ages" of which chronological age may be least important. (Compare people to automobiles where factors such as mileage and maintenance may be more important than the year the car was built.)*

c. *The individual process of aging is caused by a combination of a person's genetic history, environmental factors and life style. Thus each person has considerable influence over his or her aging process, since genetic history is the only factor that cannot be controlled.*

ACTIVITY 2: SOCIAL PROBLEMS OF AGING

Overview:

Students are presented with typical problem situations faced by older people. Small groups prepare skits dramatizing the situations and solutions to the problems. Each group performs its skit for the class, after which the class discusses the situation and the way the problem was solved. Older volunteers are invited to view and discuss the skits with the class, thus offering the perspectives of both "young" and "old" on the problem situations.

Objectives:

At the conclusion of this activity, students will be able to:

1. Express greater understanding of typical social problems faced by elders.

2. Cite ways in which society often places restrictions and demands on the behavior of older people.

3. Recognize similarities in the way society often expects old people and young people to behave.

Materials needed

For students and guests:

1. Handout #1: "Skit Situations"

2. Handout #2: "Skit Analysis"

Advance preparation:

Prepare sufficient copies of Handouts #1 and #2 for distribution to each member of the class and invited guests.

Arrange for small theater space or set up classroom furnishings for a stage area and audience.

Arrange for at least six older guests to visit the class when skits are presented and discussed by the class (Days 4-5-6).

Estimated teaching time:

4 class periods

Guidelines, day 3:

1. Divide your class into small groups of four to six students.

2. Distribute copies of Handout #1, "Skit Situations," to all members of the class.

3. Review directions on the handout and answer questions.

4. Give the groups a few minutes to review the problem situations.

5. Ask each group to choose the one they wish to dramatize, and do not allow more than one group for each situation.

6. Allow students the remainder of the period to plan their skits according to the directions on the handout.

7. Circulate from group to group to answer questions and provide help as needed, but let students work out their own solutions to problems.

Guidelines, days 4 and 5:

8. Introduce the invited older guests to the class and provide seats which mingle them with the class rather than sitting as a "bloc" of older people. Distribute a copy of Handout #1, "Skit Situations," to each guest.

9. Allow each group up to ten minutes to present its skit.

Guidelines, day 6:

10. Assign the class to discussion groups so that each group includes at least one member of every group that presented a skit.

11. Ask the older guests to divide up so that at least one older person takes part in each discussion group.

12. Distribute copies of Handout #2, "Skit Analysis," to all participants.

13. Ask the groups to discuss each of the skits presented over the past two days in terms of the questions listed on the handout.

14. If time allows, hold a general feedback session at the end in which the class and invited guests share their comments about the skits and the issues involved.

Handout #1: Skit Situations

Instructions: Each group is responsible for developing a skit based on a problem situation involving one or more elderly people. Your group will present the skit before the class after which it will be discussed with the class and invited guests. In order to plan your skit, do the following:

1. Read all of the problem situations listed below and choose the one about which you would like to develop your skit.

2. Plan how you will dramatize the situation so that it is clear to the audience what the problem is and how you choose to solve the problem.

3. Decide what characters will be involved in your dramatization and what each person will do or say. After you have planned the skit, then write out a script.

4. Assign the role that each member of your group will play in the skit.

5. Decide what simple props, costume effects and makeup you need and plan how you will get or make them.

6. Schedule a time and place when your group can get together to rehearse the skit.

Problem Situations:

1. You are a recently retired engineer, age sixty-five. You enjoy good health and now, for the first time in your life, you have the financial resources and leisure time to do some of the things you always wanted to do. You want to learn to fly and earn your pilot's license. Your wife and children are trying to talk you out of doing anything so "foolish and dangerous" at your age.

2. You are a grandmother. Your married daughter has two children, a five year old boy and a three year old girl. Unfortunately, your daughter thinks of you as a ready baby-sitter whenever she needs someone to care for her children. Although you love your grandchildren, they are not always well behaved, and after raising your own family, you would like a little rest from child care. Your daughter and her husband are planning to go away for a weekend and assume you will be delighted to look after the children.

3. You are an elderly widow who has fallen in love with a man you met at the senior drop-in center. After six months of dating, he has proposed to you. Both of you have grown children who may not take kindly to the idea of your remarrying. You are trying to decide how to break the news to them.

4. You are a retired factory worker with a heart condition. Since retirement, the rising cost of living and medical expenses have forced you to use up most of your savings, and your social security check is not enough to live on. You want to return to work on a part-time basis, but haven't been able to find a job. You are applying for a position as a security guard in an apartment building, but the manager seems very doubtful of your ability to perform the job.

5. You are an elderly person living alone in New York. A recent stroke has left you partially paralyzed on the left side. You don't want to leave your familiar neighborhood and friends, but you do find it difficult to manage on your own. Your daughter, who lives in Chicago, is insisting that you come there to live in a nursing home, where you would have regular care and she would be able to visit you frequently.

6. You are an elderly couple with three grown children, all of whom are married and have children. Every Thanksgiving your children and grandchildren all come home for a big turkey dinner. Since some of them live out of state, they not only come for dinner, but also plan to stay overnight. This will mean long hours of work cleaning house, preparing beds, and slaving in the kitchen. This year you'd like one of your children to play host and invite you for the Thanksgiving holidays.

Handout #2: Skit Analysis

Discuss the following questions for each skit presented for the class:

1. Did the dramatization successfully present the problem situation as described on Handout #1, "Skit Situations"?

2. Was the problem satisfactorily resolved?

3. Was the problem one that might typically be faced by older people?

Discuss the following questions in terms of the problems all the skits illustrated:

1. Did the skits reveal ways in which society expects older people to behave differently than they would if younger?

2. Are these expectations about the way older people should behave realistic or fair?

3. Are there any similarities in the way society expects young people and old people to behave?

Appoint one member of your group to take notes and report back to the class the main conclusions you reached in your discussion.